

A Study on Students' Choice of Metaphor to Describe the Process of Learning English at an Institution of Higher Learning in Malaysia

By

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Abstract

The goals of curriculum differentiation are to find the closest, most comfortable fit between the learner and the curriculum and to vary the process or content or product to match the needs of the learner to help them reach that close fit. One way in which we can try to understand the differences in the learning needs of our students is through their choice of metaphors. This paper is designed to identify the perceptions of 140 first-semester Malay students at the Northern Malaysia University College of Engineering on how they view the process of learning English in general from a metaphorical perspective. It has the following objectives: to identify the overall pattern in choice of metaphors among respondents; to identify the differences in the choice of metaphors among the respondents based on gender; and to identify the differences in the choice of metaphors among the respondents based on fields of specialization.

Introduction

Curriculum differentiation is a broad term referring to the need to tailor teaching environments and practices to create appropriately different learning experiences for different students. To differentiate instruction is to recognize students varying background knowledge, readiness, language, preferences in learning, interests, and to react responsively. Differentiated instruction is a process to approach teaching and learning for students of differing abilities in the same class. The intent of differentiating instruction is to maximize each student's growth and individual success by meeting each student where he or she is, and assisting in the learning process (Hall, 2003).

Curriculum differentiation is not a curriculum or a program. It is a process that enables teachers to improve student learning by matching students' individual learning characteristics to the curriculum. Differentiation requires teachers to anticipate and acknowledge the differences in each student's readiness, interests, and learning styles. Teachers can then effectively engage students in meaningful and challenging work. Classroom teachers can challenge every student to think, work, and produce at a high level while simultaneously targeting the specific learning needs of their students (Dinnocenti, 1998). According to Curry (1999), the goals of curriculum differentiation are to find the closest, most comfortable fit between the learner and the curriculum and to vary the process or content or product to match the needs of the learner to help us reach that close fit.

The aforementioned tells us of the need to identify students' learning characteristics and to be able to gauge the differences in their learning needs so that we can vary our teaching strategies to maximize learning. One way in which we can try to understand the differences in the learning needs of our students is through their choice of metaphors. This paper hopes to find the closest, most comfortable fit between the learner and the

curriculum, as specified by Curry (1999) above, by asking students to indicate how best they view the process of learning English in general through their choice of metaphors. Such a study should be of value to the classroom instructors in that results that accrue from it can help them in managing the classroom and to plan their curriculum and syllabus accordingly.

Metaphors in Education

Metaphor is for most people device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish-- a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The literal meaning of metaphor – a word or phrase used in an imaginative way to describe something (Wehmeier, 2000) – is not so different from the interpretation of dictionary makers and other students of meaning (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). According to Luitel (2004), we frequently hear from professors as saying education is a catalyst. This example portrays a pervasive nature of metaphors in our day-to-day activities. Furthermore, on the one hand, the metaphorical expressions help us understand the worldview of others and on the other hand, it helps build our system of understanding and knowledge. Consequently, the impact of thinking and understanding is obvious in our action. He adds that metaphors represent our thinking, understanding and perception of concepts in the continuum of our normal communication to professional discourse. When we compare one concept in terms of another, an inherent pattern of systematicity of source concept is corresponded to make us understand the target concept (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). For instance, when we are trying to conceptualise teaching as acting we correspond such experience of acting (source concept) that helps understand teaching (target concept).

The notions of teaching and learning are largely metaphorical. Furthermore, our practice of teaching is influenced by the metaphors we use to represent the notions of student learning (Dooley, 1998). For example, scaffolding metaphor (Englert et al., 2001) comes from Vygotskian perspective. Basically, we use this metaphor while constructing a supporting framework and remedial instruction for the students. Scaffolding metaphor regards the learner as apprentice and learning as supporting with structured strategies. This metaphor views that each learner has unique characteristics that is to be dealt through individualised instruction and regards the adult support (teaching) as a social process (Confrey, 1995).

Wilson (1995) in his article on metaphors gives an in-depth account of the different assumptions underlying common metaphors for instruction:

--The *classroom* metaphor suggests that instruction is what goes on in classrooms during 50-minute intervals. Following this way of thinking, instruction is what happens in schools. The emphasis is often on the teacher's presentation activities, since so much school-based instruction is teacher-led and teacher-centered. In everyday language, our use of 'instruction' often rests on the classroom metaphor.

--The *product delivery* metaphor conveys an image of instruction as a package to be exported from its production site to its delivery site. This metaphor has had a number of salutary effects on the field, including the notions of "delivery systems", "production methods", and even "media." Some negative influences may also be observed. For example, the product or package metaphor underlies the radio commercials promoting audiotape programs promising to teach you vocabulary, foreign language, assertiveness, or how to lose weight. This extreme form of the product metaphor becomes the "pill" metaphor: Instruction is a pill that you take to address a learning deficit and magically, you learn something! A sure-fire indicator of the pill metaphor is that the program will do all the work for you; as they say, "All you do is listen!"

--*Systems* definitions of instruction emphasize inputs and outputs, interlocking mechanisms, and self-correcting feedback and maintenance. On this view, instructional interventions must take the whole system into account, and not expect linear cause-and-effect consequences. The full effects of adopting an instructional strategy will reverberate throughout the system and will result in targeted as well as unexpected outcomes. Systems views may concentrate on the "macro" level, which includes the surrounding culture, organization, and facilities (Tessmer & Harris, 1992). In contrast, systems analyses of instruction may focus on the individual learner as a system interacting with instruction or with a teacher. The interactive "conversation" between learner and instructional system has been an important influence on the design of computer-based instruction (e.g., Merrill, 1968; Pask, 1976).

--*Process* definitions tend to emphasize the steps or stages of design, or steps or stages of instruction. Process models are often the flip side of systems models--the systems models identifying the structure and the process models identifying the flow through that structure. Systems design models emphasize process in terms of specific analyses and steps of production. Similarly, Gagné's nine events of instruction emphasize process and are often used as a process template for organizing and sequencing instruction.

--*The authentic-assessment movement* has placed student evaluation within everyday performance environments (Reeves & Okey, 1996). Many tools of authentic assessment (e.g., portfolios, journals, logs, etc.) are rich in content but lean in quantifiability, making them less useful for driving performance-based systems and processes.

--*The constructivist movement* has helped to validate a more open-systems view of instruction that is less defined by prespecified objectives and more open to the initiative of students and teachers. The result is instruction that depends more on context-sensitive decisions and resources.

One of the most important aspects of a metaphor is the roles it creates for self and others. Metaphors that focus on what the teacher does rather than what the students learn cast students as passive receivers. They inhibit teacher behaviors that might encourage students to take an active role in their learning. Sadly, teachers will often condemn students for laziness or apathy when, in fact, they give the students no opportunity to assume responsibility for their learning. Examining the roles inherent in a teacher's metaphor can provide remarkable insights on these problems. If reforms are to succeed, teachers must actively explore these critical components of their thinking. The unconscious cognitive processes of both theorists and teachers must be brought into consciousness if there is any hope of creating a meaningful change in education (Teacher's Mind Resources, 2001).

According to Lawley and Tompkins (2000), in the 1980s, psychotherapist David Grove realised that many of his clients naturally described their symptoms and outcomes in metaphor. He discovered that when he enquired about these metaphors using the client's exact words, their perception of their problems began to change. This led him to create Clean Language, a method of asking simple questions of clients' metaphors which neither contaminate nor distort them. Based on this, Lawley and Tompkins elicited a metaphor for learning from ten adult students:

1. *Planting flowers* -- A seed is planted in my mind which I nurture with water and sun in the faith that it will sprout and grow.
2. *Playing cards* -- I divide things into four categories and look for patterns across the suits until the logic and meaning emerges and I know which card to play.
3. *Savings account* -- I invest the time to accumulate data and information until there is enough interest that I can roll it over into the next idea.
4. *Switching on a light bulb* -- It's not until the light switches on that I have an insight or an 'ah ha'.
5. *Eating* -- You need to take in the basic meat and potatoes before you get to the mouth-watering dessert.
6. *Being a detective* -- It's all about uncovering the facts, looking for clues and asking the right questions until the whole mystery makes sense.
7. *Peeling an onion* -- I peel off a layer which reveals the next layer to be peeled off. Each time something tells me I'm get closer to the core of the matter.
8. *A quest* -- I'm searching for that illusive something and every step I take brings me closer to what I need to know, but I never get there ... it's a continuous journey.
9. *Sculpting* -- You start with the raw material and shape it into a form that's pleasing to the eye.

10. *Wrestling* -- I struggle with the ideas until they're pinned down and I've captured them.

These metaphors reveal the diversity of student's symbolic representations for how they learn. They also suggest some interesting contrasts. For example the 'savings account' student steadily accumulates knowledge, whereas no learning will appear to be happening for the 'light bulb' student until the light is switched on. The 'playing cards' student presumably wants all the cards dealt so they can start looking for patterns, but giving the 'detective' student all the relevant information in advance will probably take the fun out of their investigation. The student on a 'quest' needs to discover new things at each step of their journey, while the 'planting flowers' student will want to stay with and continually tend the seed of an idea (Lawley & Tompkins, 2000).

In short, the brief overview of the roles of metaphors in education above show that any metaphor we use has the potential to expand or limit our range of options to lead us toward growth and development or to stop us from seeing life in a new perspective. According to Bowman (1988), the challenge is to bring our operating metaphors into conscious awareness, to consider how they can help us understand how students view the teaching and learning of English in a figurative manner.

Statement of the Problem

In this research, I am interested in discovering how students view the process of learning English in general via their choice of metaphors.

Objectives of the Study

This study has the following objectives:

1. to identify the overall pattern in choice of metaphors among the respondents
2. to identify the differences in the choice of metaphors among the respondents based on gender;
3. to identify the differences in the choice of metaphors among the respondents based on area of specialization.

Significance of Study

Results from the study would yield data which should be of significance to the English language instructors to help them fathom the perception students have toward the language curriculum from a figurative perspective. Based on the results, language instructors can tailor their lessons and take the appropriate measures to help students move along in their quest to learn the language.

Methodology

The Setting and Subjects

This study was designed to identify and compare the perceptions of 140 first-semester Malay students at the Northern Malaysia University College of Engineering on how they view the process of learning English in general. This study possesses the characteristics of descriptive research in that it is concerned with the perceptions of respondents. The type of descriptive research was the survey method.

The instrument for the survey was a questionnaire consisting of ten items based on the metaphors elicited by Lawley and Tompkins (2000) from their students using the Clean Language method -- each one a figurative statement followed by a description of what each statement means. The purpose of the scale is to identify how students view the process of learning English in general in terms of their choice of the figurative language of metaphors.

Findings and Discussion

One-hundred and forty first-semester Malay students were randomly selected as samples from a total of 439 students who were enrolled in the EUW 112 Foundation English course at the Northern Malaysia University College of Engineering. This course is specially designed for students who scored Bands 1- 3 on the Malaysian University English Test.

From the total number of respondents, 88 were males and 52 females, with ages ranging from 18 to 42 as shown in Table 1 below

Table 1. Age of Respondents

	Frequency	Percent
18	2	1.4
19	70	50.0
20	11	7.9
21	5	3.6
22	26	18.6
23	15	10.7
24	6	4.3
25	1	.7
27	1	.7
28	1	.7
32	1	.7
42	1	.7
Total	140	100.0

Table 2 below shows the cross-tabulation of choice of metaphors by gender and field of specialization.

Table 2. Field of Specialization and Gender Cross-tabulated with Choice of Metaphor

		Planting flowers	Savings account	Light bulb	eating	detective	peeling onion	quest	sculpting	wrestling	playing cards	Total
Male	Communication	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Computer	2	0	0	0	2	2	2	0	0	0	8
	Electrical system	6	1	1	1	3	0	4	0	1	3	20
	Electronics	0	2	1	1	1	0	4	0	0	0	9
	Industrial electronics	0	0	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	1	4
	Manufacturing	0	2	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	6
	Materials	0	1	0	2	1	0	3	1	0	0	8
	Mechatronics	3	2	0	0	2	1	2	1	1	0	12
	Metallurgy	1	0	1	0	1	1	3	0	0	0	7
	Micro electronics	2	2	0	1	3	1	2	0	1	1	13
			14	10	3	6	15	5	25	2	3	5
Female	Communication	2	0	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	4
	Computer	1	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	0	3
	Electrical system	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
	electronics	2	0	0	0	4	0	6	0	0	1	13
	Industrial electronics	1	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	4
	Manufacturing	0	1	0	0	0	1	2	1	0	1	6
	Materials	1	4	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	0	10
	Mechatronics	0	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	1	4
	Metallurgy	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	3
	Micro electronics	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	3
			7	9	1	0	7	4	18	2	0	4

Based on Table 2 above, we have the breakdown in the number of respondents according to fields of specialization, frequency in choice of metaphors based on gender and field of specialization.

Table 3. Number of Respondents based on Fields of Specialization

Specialization	Frequency
Communication	5
Computer	11
Electrical system	22
Electronics	22
Industrial electronics	8
Manufacturing	12
Materials	18
Mechatronics	16
Metallurgy	10
Micro electronics	16
Total	140

Table 4 shows the breakdown in the number of respondents according to choice of metaphors.

Table 4. Frequency in Choice of Metaphors

Metaphors	Frequency	Percent
Planting flowers	21 (3)	15.0
Savings account	19 (4)	13.6
Switching on a light bulb	4 (7)	2.9
Eating	6 (6)	4.3
Being a detective	22 (2)	15.7
Peeling an onion	9 (5)	6.4
A quest	43 (1)	30.7
Sculpting	4 (7)	2.9
Wrestling	3 (8)	2.1
Playing cards	9 (5)	6.4
Total	140	100.0

(The numbers in brackets indicate rank-order in the choice of metaphors)

Table 5 below shows the frequency of choice metaphor based on fields of specialization.

	Planting flowers	Savings account	Light bulb	eating	detective	Peeling onion	quest	sculpting	wrestling	Playing cards	Total
Communication	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	5
Computer	3	0	0	0	2	2	4	0	0	0	11
Electrical system	6	2	1	1	3	0	5	0	1	3	22
Electronics	2	2	1	1	5	0	10	0	0	1	22
Industrial electronics	1	0	0	1	1	2	2	0	0	1	8
Manufacturing	0	3	0	0	2	1	4	1	0	1	12
Materials	1	5	0	2	1	0	7	2	0	0	18
Mechatronics	3	3	0	0	3	1	3	1	1	1	16
Metallurgy	1	2	1	0	2	1	3	0	0	0	10
Micro electronics	2	2	1	1	3	1	3	0	1	2	16
Total	21	19	4	6	22	9	43	4	3	9	140

Table 6 below shows the frequency of choice of metaphor based on gender.

Metaphors	Male	Female	Total
Planting flowers	14(3)	7(3)	21
Savings account	10(4)	9(2)	19
Switching on a bulb	3(7)	1(6)	4
Eating	6(5)	0(7)	6
Being a detective	15(2)	7(3)	22
Peeling an onion	5(6)	4(4)	9
A quest	25(1)	18(1)	43
Sculpting	2(8)	2(5)	4
Wrestling	3(7)	0(7)	3
Playing cards	5(6)	4(4)	9
Total	88	52	140

(The numbers in brackets indicate rank-order in choice of metaphors)

According to Morgan (1993) images and metaphors are not only interpretive constructs or ways of seeing; they also provide frameworks for action. Their use creates insights that often allow us to act in ways that we may not have thought possible before. Data delineated above show that there are differences in the way respondents view metaphorically the process of learning English as it applies to them, and these should be useful to help us conceptualize our beliefs about teaching and learning, and help us to act accordingly. For example, in this research, most of the respondents indicated that learning English is a quest. This gives us a rare view of how students perceived what learning English in general is all about. This should help us tailor our style and technique of teaching to fit what our students envisage: A quest. We should see ourselves as a quest master, a path finder and even a quartermaster to supply them with the necessary provision for the journey.

The quest metaphor should act as the dominant metaphor which guides our teaching and classroom preparation. If we wish to take into account the other metaphors, then maybe we can accommodate the other top two most preferred metaphors—in this case planting flowers and being a detective—and place them within the context of the quest metaphor. The other metaphors should not be dismissed completely but could be used on a personal basis to understand a particular student's needs and problems if need be.

Conclusion

According to Williams (1983), the metaphorical mode of teaching is holistic; it constantly focuses on the processes of recognizing and understanding patterns and general principles which give meaning to specific facts. Each unit is no longer an isolated set of information but an opportunity to make new connections, to gain insight into both the new subject and that which is already known. Learning has a sense of integration when the emphasis is on seeing relationships; it is both more efficient and more satisfying. This is certainly most apt as seen in the context of this research where, given a choice of 10 simple metaphors to choose from, a variety of patterns emerged with certain metaphors being the preferred choice. And the language teachers should take heed of this to help them manage their class and prepare themselves mentally, metaphorically speaking.

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